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ABSTRACT

A fact sheet on foreign language immersion programs, in which the regular school curriculum is taught partially or entirely in a foreign language, briefly discusses the following: (1) the structure and goals of immersion instruction; (2) the introduction of English instruction; (3) the eventual effect of immersion instruction on verbal and mathematical skills in English; (4) key ingredients of a successful program; (5) the advantages and disadvantages of the total and partial immersion program designs; (6) optimum grade level for beginning an immersion program; (7) the necessary commitment on the part of parents and participants; (8) staffing and staff utilization; (9) obtaining instructional materials; (10) the effect of the immersion program on the district's existing foreign language program; and (11) enrollment projections. (MSE)

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ERIC Q&A

FOREIGN LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAMS

October 1987

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Q&A

Foreign Language Immersion Programs

Prepared by Myriam Met

October 1987

This fact sheet is based on a more comprehensive article by Myriam Met entitled "Twenty Questions: The most commonly asked questions about starting a foreign language program" in the September 1987 issue of Foreign Language Annals.

What Is a Foreign Language Immersion Program?

Immersion is defined as a method of foreign language instruction in which the regular school curriculum is taught through the medium of the language. That is, the foreign language is the vehicle for content instruction; it is not the subject of instruction itself. Total immersion is one program format among several that range on a continuum in terms of time spent in the foreign language. In total immersion all schooling in the initial years is conducted in the foreign language, including reading and language arts. Partial immersion differs from total in that 50 percent of the school day is conducted in English right from the start. In partial immersion reading and language arts are always taught in English. Beyond that, the choice of subjects taught in each language is a local decision.

What Are the Goals of an Immersion Program?

Long-range goals of an immersion program include:

1. developing a high level of proficiency in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing the foreign language.
2. developing positive attitudes toward those who speak the foreign language and toward their culture(s).
3. developing English language skills commensurate with expectations for student's age and abilities.
4. gaining skills and knowledge in the content areas of the curriculum in keeping with stated objectives in these areas.

In the short run, Goal 3 may not be accomplished in full. Until English language arts are introduced, total immersion students usually do not perform as well as their monolingually educated peers on those sections of achievement tests that measure skills on English language mechanics. Although immersion students usually do well on measures of reading comprehension, they may have difficulty with English spelling, punctuation, and similar language-specific skills. Later, when English language arts instruction is formally introduced, this lag in achievement disappears.

In Total Immersion, When Is English Language Arts Instruction Introduced? How Much Instruction Is Given in English?

Different schools phase English in at different grade levels. The original model of total immersion pioneered in Canada introduced English language arts in the second grade with the ultimate goal of instruction being a 50-50 balance of languages in the upper elementary grades. Some schools do not introduce English language arts until fifth grade, and this seems to be a growing trend. Increasingly, experienced immersion educators are changing to an 80-20 ratio (foreign language to English) due to the insignificant differences in English language achievement whether the amount of instruction given in English constitutes 50 percent or 20 percent of the day; in contrast, there is a significant difference in students' continued growth in the foreign language when the percentage of time spent in that language drops from 80 to 50 percent.

What Eventual Effect Does an Immersion Program Have on the Participants' Verbal and Mathematical Skills in English?

Studies have consistently shown that immersion students do as well as, and may even surpass, comparable non-immersion students on measures of verbal and mathematic skills.

What Are the Key Ingredients of a Successful Immersion Program?

Successful immersion programs are characterized by:

- administrative support.
- community and parental support.
- qualified teachers. Teachers must be trained (and preferably experienced) in elementary education and specifically in the grade level to be taught. They must also have near native proficiency in the oral and written forms of the foreign language.
- appropriate materials in the foreign language.
- time for teachers to prepare instructional materials in the language.
- ongoing staff development.

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What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Total and Partial Immersion?

Total immersion has the advantage of being the most effective way of developing foreign language proficiency. Such proficiency does not come at the expense of achievement in English language arts or in other areas of the curriculum. The intensity of the immersion experience coupled with the sheer amount of exposure to the foreign language assures that students have the necessary language skills to deal with the abstractions of the curriculum in the upper elementary grades.

Total immersion, however, is not for everyone. Not all parents (or staffs or administrators) buy into the concept that students can learn just as much in a foreign language as in their own. Total immersion has the further disadvantage of requiring a teacher for each immersion class. Not only are immersion teachers somewhat difficult to find, but they may also end up displacing someone already on staff since most elementary schools do not already have qualified immersion teachers on board.

In contrast, partial immersion needs only half as many special teachers since each one may serve two immersion classes for one half day each. Therefore, it is easier to staff partial immersion, and the potential effect on current staff is lessened. Further, partial immersion is a more viable alternative for parents who feel uncomfortable with the idea of their children learning to read in a language other than English. Partial immersion seems to be more palatable to a wider range of parents and school personnel.

Unfortunately, partial immersion is not nearly as effective as total immersion. Students in partial immersion do not develop the level of foreign language proficiency developed by total immersion students. A consequence of this lower level of proficiency is that students have greater difficulty dealing with school curriculum in those subjects and grade levels which are characterized by verbal abstractions.

In the long run, partial immersion does not produce better English language achievement than in total immersion, although in the short run, the initial lag in achievement associated with total immersion does not occur in partial immersion.

At What Grade Level Is It Best to Begin an Immersion Program?

In the United States, most programs begin in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or Grade 1. Canadian educators report success with programs beginning with Grade 4 as well as in Grades 7-9. These programs, however, do not appear to serve the wide range of ability and achievement levels characteristic of pupils who enter immersion at the early grade levels.

What Kind of Commitment Should Be Required for Participants and Their Parents?

Many programs do not require a formal commitment from parents. Others ask parents to commit to keeping their child in the program for a minimum of six months or one year. Whether a formal commitment is required or not, extensive parent orientation prior to admitting students is important to ensure that parents (and where appropriate, students) understand the nature of the program.

Periodically, opportunities should be provided to address parents' questions and concerns that arise once their child is actually in the program. Frequent and close communication between school and parents helps to maintain the commitment parents made when choosing the program for their child.

How Are Immersion Programs Staffed?

Immersion requires teachers who are elementary trained and experienced and who have near native proficiency in the language. If current staff members meet these criteria, they are ideal candidates for positions in the program. Usually, however, schools find it necessary to employ new staff. Unless new students come into the school to justify additional positions, a new program frequently results in the unfortunate displacement of some current staff members.

Finding qualified immersion teachers can be difficult but not impossible. Some school systems are located in areas where elementary trained teachers who are fluent in the language may be residing right in the local community. Advertisements may be placed in newspapers of major cities where potential candidates may be found. In addition, some school systems have also been successful in recruiting teachers from abroad. Substitutes or permanent replacements are not often readily available; therefore, it is important to identify potential substitutes or replacements well before they are actually needed.

How Can a Program Be Started Without Terminating or Replacing Staff?

Existing staff does not need to be supplanted if additional students are recruited. If existing half-day kindergarten classes are expanded to full day, then additional kindergarten teachers will be needed---whether or not an immersion program is initiated. Although this will not solve staff displacement problems in the ensuing grades, it is possible that through a combination of an increase in the student population or through natural staff attrition displacement may be minimized.

Where Can One Get Materials for Use in an Immersion Program?

French materials are available from both Canadian and European sources, as well as a growing number of American publishers. Spanish materials may be acquired from publishing firms that offer Spanish-language versions of basal programs in reading and language arts, science, mathematics, and social studies. In addition to valuable information on immersion, an appendix on instructional materials in the forthcoming book,

Language and Children: Making the Match. Foreign Language Instruction in the Elementary School by Helena Anderson Curtain and Carol Ann Pesola, provides useful information. The book will be available from Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA in April 1988 (price to be announced).

Parent–teacher interest groups and immersion materials resource centers, still in their infancy stages, are quickly gaining momentum in the field. Interested educators and parents may develop contacts in the field by writing one or all of the following centers or groups: (1) **CLEAR Resource Center,** 1118 22nd St., NW, Washington, DC 20037 for a list of materials and resources for immersion programs; (2) **Advocates for Language Learning (ALL),** P.O. Box 4964, Culver City, CA 90231, an advocacy group for parents and educators interested in early language learning; an $8.00 membership includes a quarterly newsletter and conference announcements; and (3) **National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL),** Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd St., NW, Washington, DC 20037; membership includes a subscription to *FLES NEWS* three times a year and participation in special interest sessions at language conferences. An additional information source is the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers, 1815 promenade Alta, Suite 101, Ottawa, Ontario, K1G 3Y6 Canada.

What Probable Effect Will an Immersion Program Have on the School's or School District's Existing Foreign Language Program?

Obviously, students who are in the immersion sequence cannot profit from instruction in regular foreign language courses. Immersion students are fluent in the foreign language by second or third grade. Therefore, provision should be made for their continued growth in the foreign language in the form of specially designed courses. These will be very similar to the language arts courses students receive in English.

The immersion program may also affect the attitudes of non-immersion students toward foreign language instruction. These students may be motivated by the positive attitudes and the proficiency of immersion students. Learning a foreign language may become a valued skill throughout the school because of the immersion program's popularity and success.

How Many Students Should a School Plan for?

The number of students in any given class is determined by the school's pupil/teacher ratio. Class sizes in public school immersion programs generally range from 20 to 35. Obviously, small class sizes are desirable.

In the course of the years there will naturally be attrition. Often, students who leave the program are not replaced. Therefore, it is important to determine the desired size of the cohort at the end of the program sequence and then project backwards to determine the appropriate size of the cohort upon program entry. For example, a school that wants to maintain a class of 20 fifth graders may begin with 40 kindergarteners or first graders.

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TOTAL AND PARTIAL IMMERSION PROGRAMS IN U.S. ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS, 1987

Note: At least 30 schools and/or school districts in the U.S. have total and/or partial immersion programs for native speakers of English at the elementary level. The brief list below includes four of the longest-running and most established programs. For a complete list of immersion programs, contact: The Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR), Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, DC 20037. Tel. (202) 429-9292.

SCHOOL DISTRICT/ CITY	COMMENTS	NO. OF SCHOOLS	NO. OF PUPILS	NO. OF TEACHERS	LANGUAGES	CONTACTS
Culver City, CA	-started 1971 -local funding -total immersion -magnet school	1	120	4	Spanish	Eugene Ziff, Principal El Rincon Elementary School 11177 Overland Ave. Culver City, CA 90230 (213) 839-5285
Milwaukee Public Schools, WI	-started 1977 -local funding -total immersion/ begins with 4 yr old kindergarten -immersion in middle school	3	345 German K-8 305 French K-7 329 Spanish K-5 114 Middle	30	German French Spanish	Helena Anderson Curtain Foreign Language Curriculum Specialist Milwaukee Public Schools P.O. Drawer 10K Milwaukee, WI 53201 (414) 475-8305
Montgomery County Public Schools, MD	-started 1974 -small outside funding -total immersion -articulation with junior high	1	265 Grades K-6	11	French	William Baranick, Principal Oak View Elementary School 400 E. Wayne Ave. Silver Spring, MD 20901 (301) 589-0020
Cincinnati Public Schools, OH	-started 1974 -local funding -magnet schools -articulated with jr. and sr. high -partial immersion in six schools	4 2	992 749	24 14	Spanish French	Nelida Mietta-Fontana or Carolyn Andrade F.L. Supervisors Cincinnati Public Schools 230 E. 9th St. Cincinnati, OH 45202 (513) 369-4937